

Amazon probes alleged bribery of staffers for data on e-tail platform

I'll give you this Cool Thing™ if you nix that review for me

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Amazon is investigating reports that its retail employees are selling internal data and reviewers' email addresses to merchants that want to game the system.

The allegations, reported by *The Wall Street Journal* yesterday, come from insiders at Jeff Bezos' firm and sellers who said they had been offered, or purchased, such data.

According to the *WSJ*, Amazon staffers have used third parties to offer up confidential information that will help those using the online marketplace to sell their products.

These brokers act as intermediaries between the seller and people within Amazon who can hand over internal sales metrics – such as stats on sales volumes or search keywords – that can be used to game the system.

They will also hand over reviewers' email addresses so Amazon marketplace traders can ask reviewers to adjust or delete the review – often in exchange for free products.

Some staffers with the right access levels are reported to have accepted payment to reinstate people who have been booted off the platform, or to delete negative reviews. For the latter, brokers are

said to demand as much as \$300 per review and set a five-review minimum.

About half of the items on Amazon's marketplace are sold by people or organisations independent of Amazon, and business is cutthroat. There are already various scams and schemes – like fake reviews or payment for clicks – that aim to boost products up the rankings and get them to appear on the coveted first page.

This latest practice of cash for data is alleged to be most prevalent in China, which the *WSJ* said was due to a combination of an influx of new sellers in the country, and Amazon paying lower wages there.

Amazon – which is trying to crack down on dodgy practices on the marketplace more broadly – told *The Register* it was "conducting a thorough investigation of these claims".

In a canned statement, Amazon PR emphasised the firm's rules and regs. "We have strict policies and a Code of Business Conduct and Ethics in place for our employees.

"We implement sophisticated systems to restrict and audit access to information. We hold our employees to a high ethical standard and anyone in violation of our Code faces discipline, including termination and potential legal and criminal penalties."

Amazon said it had a "zero tolerance" policy for abuse of its systems by sellers and that it would take "swift action" against "bad actors". This includes terminating accounts, deleting reviews, withholding funds, and taking legal action. ®